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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002644

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USARPAC FOR LTG BROWN

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF USARPAC LTG JOHN M. BROWN III

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. John, we are looking forward to your visit and appreciate USARPAC's support of Cobra Gold. We are pleased that Cobra Gold this year includes the active participation of Japan, Singapore and Indonesia. We are working closely with your staff to make Cobra Gold a capstone event for the Global Peace Operations Initiative in 2007. While things have settled down for the moment on the domestic political front, a great deal of uncertainty remains over who the next Prime Minister will be and the makeup of the new Parliament. Addressing the separatist unrest in southern Thailand remains the primary focus of the Royal Thai Army (RTA). Under the leadership of the RTA CINC, GEN Sonthi Boonyaratklin, the RTA appears to be improving its ability to address the unrest. Your visit is also a superb opportunity to review key security programs with Senior Thai Military officials. END SUMMARY.

#### THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

¶2. (C) Bilateral relations with Thailand remain very good despite the uncertainty over domestic politics. Thailand is a Treaty Ally and has been firmly supportive of the International War on Terror and has participated in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). American businesses have over \$20 billion in direct investment in Thailand. The United States is Thailand's largest export market and its second-largest foreign investor.

¶3. (C) Nonetheless, there are points of friction. Human rights remains a key concern. On October 25, 2004, poorly trained Thai military and civilian security forces forced nearly 1,300 Thai Muslim protesters into trucks to be transported to a military base nearly three hours away. 78 protesters died en route. Our protests over Thai Police involvement in approximately 1,300 extrajudicial killings during the 2003 Thai "war on drugs," rankles the Thai Government. Likewise, Thailand's policy of "constructive engagement" with the military junta in Burma and provision of economic assistance to Rangoon is a source of continuing frustration for us. The Thai government supports democracy in Burma but maintains, not altogether convincingly, that engagement with the SPDC is the only realistic approach it has to make progress on the major cross-border flows of refugees, illegal economic migrants, and methamphetamines it faces from Burma.

#### THE OVERALL SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

¶4. (C) The U.S.-Thai security relationship is based on over 50 years of close cooperation. Thai soldiers, sailors and airmen participated in the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts and Thai peacekeepers served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thailand is the fourth largest participant in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use U-tapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional tsunami assistance program was key to making Operation Unified Assistance a success. In fact, PACOM recently designated U-tapao as the most important Cooperative Security Location (CSL) in the Asia Pacific Region. While we avoid using the term "CSL" with the Thai due to their sensitivities about bases, U-tapao remains vital to our interests in the region. In your meetings with Thai officials, you will want to note the overall strength of the relationship -- highlighting our history and underscoring the importance of our tsunami cooperation, exercise program, increased tempo of USN ship visits (most recently, the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group), and cooperation in the War on Terrorism.

#### THE POLITICAL SITUATION

¶5. (SBU) The Thai political system is presently working through its biggest crisis since 1992. After tens of thousands of Thais participated in peaceful rallies protesting government corruption and PM Thaksin Shinawatra's (Prime Minister TOCK-SIN) recent tax-free sale of Shin Corp to Singapore. Thaksin dissolved parliament and called snap elections. The opposition boycotted the poll, and called on the voters to abstain. Many small parties, dredged up by the

government to run "opposition" candidates were disqualified for fraud and though Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) political party won a majority of votes nationwide on April 2, the massive number of protest abstentions tainted his "victory." Thaksin, who is currently caretaker Prime Minister, may not seek to head the next government, although his plans are not clear.

**16. (C)** On April 25, the King made public statements highly critical of undemocratic aspects of the elections, and instructed the relevant judicial bodies to propose a solution to the impasse caused by the boycott of opposition parties and the large number of abstentions. The courts' recommendations are expected soon, and could include annulling the vote and scheduling new elections later this year. Despite being out of the PM's office, most observers expect that Thaksin will still be the "puppetmaster" directing his party from the background. The situation remains fluid.

#### COUNTERTERRORISM AND SOUTHERN THAILAND

**17. (C)** Until recently, Prime Minister Thaksin's biggest domestic challenge was the unsettled security situation in the far southern part of the country. Southern Thailand, in particular the southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, since January 2004, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the level of violence. Press reports indicate that over 1,000 persons have been killed either by militants or by security forces during this period. Local Muslim separatist militants have attacked symbols of Thai and Buddhist authority, civilians, and local citizens suspected of collaborating with the Government. There continue to be daily incidents of violence. In March 2005, Thaksin appointed a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) headed by highly respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun to look for alternative solutions to the long-running insurgency.

**18. (C)** Southern separatists direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Likewise, we work to avoid feeding rampant, outlandish speculation that we are somehow fomenting the violence in the South in order to justify building permanent bases -- a very sensitive issue in Thailand. We do not want to jeopardize our access to key military facilities in Thailand like Utapao Naval Air Station.

**19. (C)** Working closely with Washington, the Embassy has a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Help the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Do everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

Key military programs assisting the Thai include:

--JCETs programs focused on enhancing general CT capabilities, counter-insurgency operations, civil affairs and psychological operations, and information warfare. Since FY04 over 2500 Thai soldiers from 50 different units have been trained in counter-insurgency by U.S. Special Forces.

--Building a National Training Facility (NTF). We have worked with the Thai for over a year to develop an NTF that can serve as a world-class training facility. Such a site could not only help hone CT skills and provide human rights training, but be a key tool to improve peace keeping skills for soldiers in the region under the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). We have been cobbling funds together to make the NTF a Center of Excellence and could use more.

--PSYOPS. We presently support a U.S. Military Information Support Team (MIST) unit from Ft. Bragg attached to JUSMAGTHAI. This team will likely be augmented by an experienced Civil Affairs planner within the next month who will assist with campaign planning and product support to counter ideological support to terrorism.

At the same time, we are working with Thai and U.S. law enforcement agencies to improve the professionalization of various Thai police entities.

## MILITARY COOPERATION

¶10. (C) Perhaps due to their lack of a colonial heritage, Thai leaders are far more willing to host multilateral exercises than are others countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own training opportunities, the Royal Thai Government supports multilateral exercises as a way to show regional leadership. So long as our concepts are properly sold to Thai military and political leaders, we should be able to continue to modify exercises to meet our regional security objectives -- including an ability to establish a near-continuous presence in the region.

¶11. (C) We conduct a wide range of major exercises and training programs with Thailand each year, including Cobra Gold. Cobra Gold 2006 will include almost 7,000 U.S. troops working together with Thai counterparts in field training exercises ranging from Military Operations in Urban Terrain and Air Assault Operations to Naval Special Forces protecting offshore natural gas platforms. The Command Post Exercise at Cobra Gold will include participation by U.S., Thai, Japanese, Singaporean and Indonesian forces and will focus on peace keeping operations. Cobra Gold in the coming years will be a centerpiece of GPOI, designed to train 15,000 regional peacekeepers by 2010. Utapao, the Thai Navy Air Base used as the primary staging area for U.S. disaster relief efforts in the region following the December 2004 tsunami, has long been a critical support hub for U.S.

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aircraft transiting the region. Over 420 DOD aircraft use it each year. Our largest air exercise, Cope Tiger, involves Thailand, the United States and Singapore. We have also been working closely with PACFLT to give our major naval exercise, CARAT, a more regional flavor in the coming years.

## THE ROLE OF CHINA AND INDIA IN THE REGION

¶12. (C) Southeast Asia continues to feel the rising influence of China and India. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger relations with the two regional powers. Bangkok views both countries as sources of unlimited consumer demand and hope to conclude Free Trade Agreements with both nations. It surprises many visitors from Washington to learn that the Thai military has a number of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, the arts, the media and the military. The PLA Navy has close links with the RTN and recently conducted a major ship visit to Phuket. After jointly holding a limited naval exercise in the Andaman Sea last fall, Thailand and China are exploring conducting joint SAR exercises. The RTN has acquired several ships from China over the past decade. China is refurbishing tanks and air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. Thailand is also trying to negotiate a barter deal trading Chinese armored vehicles for Thai fruit. Mil-to-mil exchanges between China and Thailand have expanded in recent years as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits.

## THAI MILITARY STRUCTURE

¶13. (C) The relative power and influence of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) dwarfs the other services. As such, the Royal Thai Army Commander traditionally wields more real power than the Supreme Commander. Thailand's armed forces, which had a history of interfering in the country's politics, have not done so since 1992 and appear to be fully reconciled to constitutional roles of defense and security. Their exposure to U.S. civil-military values through their extensive participation in IMET training deserves some credit for this transformation of their attitude towards democracy.

## THE ROLE OF THE ARMY

¶14. (C) The Royal Thai Army (RTA) is a legacy force faced with serious modernization issues. Although 30 years have passed, the RTA is still primarily organized and equipped to defeat the large conventional threat that Vietnam represented in the mid-1980's. However, poor maintenance and systemic logistical support problems have undermined operational readiness (OR) rates of tanks, helicopters and other major systems. The real capacity of the RTA is difficult to judge due to the large and fluctuating gap between the stated table of organization and equipment (TOEs) and the real OR rates.

¶15. (C) Much of the continuing decline in operational capacity is due to the budget constraints that were imposed

from 1997-2001 after the Asian Financial Crisis that have severely impacted training and procurement. Since that time, budgets have increased slightly, but not to pre-1997 levels. Accordingly, the RTA must selectively choose how to modernize. Serious corruption in the procurement process is still widespread -- and acknowledged by many Thai officers. The RTA relies on JUSMAGTHAI and the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system for many of their high-profile procurement programs. JUSMAGTHAI is working with the RTA on a \$24M program to refurbish 7 AH-1 Cobras. The RTA has recently funded an FMS case to purchase up to 70,000 M16-A4 rifles. Two additional UH-60 Blackhawks will arrive in Thailand in early May 2006, bringing the RTA's fleet up to 7 total aircraft. Additionally, the RTA is purchasing limited quantities of GEN III Night Vision Goggles and Thermal Weapons Sights. Significant direct commercial procurement activity includes the purchase of over 1000 M240 machine guns and negotiations are underway over the purchase of 96 LAVs from Canada and the local refurbishment of 16 UH-1 helicopters originally procured through FMS.

¶16. (C) The RTA's transformation vision, unpublished and informal as it is, is to become lighter and more mobile with upgraded C4I systems that will make it more agile operationally. On the C4I front, much work remains. The RTA HQ and subordinate commands use commercial dial-up Internet services and email accounts, if they use email at all. However, they do have VTC capability and use it frequently.

¶17. (C) The RTG's CT effort in the South has been plagued by repeated changes of government policies and lead agencies. Shortly after taking power, Thaksin decided to dissolve the joint civilian-police-military Task Force which since the 1980s had successfully contained the separatist-related violence. The loss of that coordinating body increased the natural propensity of the Thai bureaucracy to stovepipe information and not cooperate operationally. The problems caused by this lack of coordination have been compounded by the constant shifting of both the civilian and military leadership responsible for the South. In addition, Thaksin often set unrealistic deadlines for his deputies to "solve" the southern problem and has been inconsistent in his policy statements, creating a situation where the operational leadership has a weak mandate and lack of strategic focus. Last year, Thaksin settled on Army CINC GEN Sonthi Boonyaratklin (who is a Muslim with a Special Forces Background) as his chief military representative. Sonthi recently assured me that the Army was rebuilding its intelligence and political network in the South, which is a good sign. Nonetheless, there is little guarantee that the Government won't switch course again in response to an actual or perceived setback.

¶18. (C) While the RTA has a long history working with the U.S. Army, recently we have also been working with MARFORPAC and III MEF to improve links between the U.S Marine Corps and the RTA. In many ways, our Marines are perfect training partners for the RTA and field exercises in Thailand afford our Marines many opportunities they don't have elsewhere in Asia. We will host the USS Essex Amphibious Assault Ship during Cobra Gold and are looking for other training opportunities in the coming months.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT

¶19. (U) We are grateful for the terrific support your staff has shown in making Cobra Gold 2006 a success. We look forward to your visit.  
BOYCE